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The underground press—

as viewed from above

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Almost without notice the raucous anti-establishment underground press has grown with fission-like fervor from only five papers five years ago to a nucleus of 177 more or less entrenched papers with a circulation of about three million today.

Another 100 papers are either newly opened or reporting on the fringes of the underground movement.

The papers, mostly weekly tabloids, are concentrated in large cities — Rat and East Village Other in New York, Seed in Chicago, Los Angeles Free Press. But almost every major city and campus has one and now they are springing up in such nonhotbeds of young militancy as Morgantown, W. Va.

GROWTH IS RAPID

The rapid growth has occurred despite an almost lugubrious number of difficulties, many of them self-created but most stemming from authorities who become apoplectic at an average issue's contents.

The reading fare includes revolutionary politics, cultural radicalism, drugs, the Black Panthers, how to live for nothing in a big city (steal), hippie communes, rock music, bomb-making, sex, organic foods, ecology, antidotes for tear gas, anti-Vietnam war agitation, draft resistance, the Yippies, and unfavorable police reportage.

The editors, most of them friendly, gentle people in person, generally have arrest records, but astonishingly few convictions, for demonstrations and for violating obscenity and common nuisance laws, such as blocking the sidewalks while selling papers.

Only 15 printers in the United States will print an underground paper without insisting on some editorial control over the often raunchy and inflammatory contents.

One of these, a Wisconsin printer, has been the target of a business boycott to force him to stop printing the Milwaukee Kaleidoscope.

One popular feature of the underground press, publishing the photographs, names and addresses of undercover police and narcotics agents, has resulted in a \$10 million suit against the Los Angeles Free Press. It published the names and addresses of 80 employees of the California State Bureau of Narcotics.

Staff disputes within underground papers are common. Half the staff is likely to walk

out or expel the other half in a dispute over political content.

Washington, for example, now has two undergrounds, the Quicksilver Times and the Voice from the Mother Country, after the Quicksilver Times staff divided on the question: Should coverage of the revolution be local or international in focus?

Belief in the imminence of "The Revolution," whether as a political takeover or a massive cultural transformation, is a sine qua non for employment on many underground newspapers.

Once the papers are on the streets, the long-haired youths who sell them risk being beaten up by street-corner punks or having the papers confiscated by police as obscene.

Altho underground editors agree that an obscenity charge is a surefire circulation builder — one paper doubled its circulation after being hauled into court — they say the legal costs eat up the new profits.

Another complicating factor is the attitude the underground press editors, who are staunch anticapitalists, have towards money. Only a few underground papers turn a profit and most of them don't try. An exception is the L.A. Free Press, which by published accounts nets \$700,000 annually.

The general thinking in the underground trade is that excess profits should be donated to one of the perennially needy leftist causes or given away to someone who presumably needs money more than the editor does.

ECONOMICS OF PUBLISHING

A not untypical example of underground economics is the Quicksilver Times, a tabloid put out here every 10 days by a staff, each of whom has an equal voice in decisions. The first among these equals is Terry Becker, an affable dropout from both college and the regular newspaper business.

As Mr. Becker describes it, each 20,000-copy edition of the Quicksilver Times costs \$1,200 in printing expenses, office supplies, telephones, utilities and office rent.

Each staff member gets 400 free copies to sell at 25 cents each. The proceeds, \$100, comprise his only salary. Whoever else sells the paper buys copies from the office at 10 cents each and sells them for 25 cents each. Some hippie hawkers of the Quicksilver Times sell more than 1,000 copies of each issue.

Advertising costs \$300 a page, if the staff approves of the ad, but the Quicksilver Times

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